

The Essex Skipper (*Thymelicus lineola* Ochs.) at Blackheath and Elsewhere in South-east London

By J. F. BURTON *

Mr. A. A. Allen's note (1978) on the presence of *Thymelicus lineola* Ochs. at Blackheath in 1977 prompts me to place on record my notes on the distribution of this butterfly during my residence in the adjacent suburb of Charlton which lasted until 1959; although in the 1950s much of my time was spent away from home and therefore restricted my observations.

Far from being a scarce species, *lineola* was well established and locally common in the late 1940s and early 1950s in several parts of suburban Blackheath, both on the rough parts of the heath and in the neglected gardens of bombed houses. These Blackheath bombed-sites, especially where Buddleia grew in profusion, were rich in butterflies in those years, and one regularly encountered such species as *Thymelicus sylvestris* Poda, *Ochlodes venata* Br. and Grey, *Colias crocea* Geoff., *Gonepteryx rhamni* L., *Pieris napi* L., *Anthocharis cardamines* L., *Lycaena phlaeas* L., *Polyommatus icarus* Rott., *Celastrina argiolus* L., *Vanessa atalanta* L., *Vanessa cardui* L., *Aglais urticae* L., *Inachis io* L., *Polygonia c-album* L., *Lasiommata megera* L., *Maniola jurtina* L., and *Coenonympha pamphilus* L. I even caught a male *Hipparchia semele* Hbn. flying across Blackheath itself on 26th August 1947; presumably a stray from one of the nearest known haunts of the species in north-west Kent, such as Sundridge Park or Dartford Heath.

During the war years and for a few years afterwards several areas of grassland on Blackheath were allowed to grow unchecked and became well endowed with wild flowers. Moreover, some of the old gravel-pits were filled with debris from bombed areas and soon became covered with a lush growth of Oxford Ragwort, Wall Rocket, melilot, thistles, and many other flowering plants typical of bomb-sites and disturbed ground. Thus these parts of Blackheath became an attractive environment for butterflies, including *lineola*. Mr. Allen will be interested to learn that off the heath it was common in July 1947 in the overgrown garden of a bombed house in Mycenae Road and on another bombed-site opposite the pond near the Prince of Wales public house. On 4th August 1957 I captured and released after examination a single individual on a bombed site in Vanbrugh Park, adjacent to the open heath. However, by the mid-1950s *lineola* was very much scarcer in the Blackheath area. It also used to occur in small numbers in the relatively wild south-east corner of Greenwich Park, but as mentioned by D. F. Owen and J. E. Owen (1950) it was declining here too by 1949.

Now that he has moved house to the neighbouring suburb of Charlton, Mr. Allen may also be interested to know that

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on 19th July 1959 I saw an Essex Skipper in my garden in Eversley Road in a heavily built-up area, and that the species used to be particularly abundant at Charlton Sandpit in the 1940s. Elsewhere in south-east London I encountered *lineola* flying in numbers, especially in 1946-47, at Greenwich Marshes, New Charlton, Kidbrooke, Lee Green (Roan School sports ground), Woolwich Common, Eltham Common, Shooter's Hill (in the open parts of the woods and especially on the golf course towards Woolwich), and in the valley bottom of East Wood in Lessness Abbey Wood. I even saw some flying along streets in Deptford during the hot summer of 1947. On the Thames Marshes it was abundant from Plumstead eastwards to Swancombe and Northfleet until the severe flooding of early 1953. Subsequently, it was less common (Burton, 1955) although plentiful enough at Abbey Wood Marshes and Dartford Marshes at least as recently as 1957.

Although Allen may be correct in suggesting that the Essex Skipper has been spreading west in recent years, I think it is likely that small isolated colonies have survived all the time in the Blackheath area and may now be expanding to recolonise former sites after many years of comparative scarcity. I believe that it probably colonised south-east London during the years of its expansion between 1930 and 1945 when the recently-ended long-term climatic amelioration reached its final peak.

Incidentally, I would be interested to know if it is still common at Charlton Sandpit. This site, protected as an S.S.S.I. for its geological importance, used to be a favourite boyhood haunt of mine and would probably still repay investigation by an entomologist. Known locally as Cox's Mount, much of the thick bed of Thanet sand has been excavated to reveal the chalk beneath. Here, as well as an interesting variety of butterflies, I found isolated, but flourishing colonies of *Zygaena lonicerae* Scheven and *Ematurga atomaria* L. in the late 1940s. *Atomaria* was reported from this district in the 18th Century by Moses Harris (1775) assuming his reference to the 'Pale Heath' in 'chalk pits by Charlton' refers to the chalk form of this moth. Other old chalk-pits in the area are nowadays occupied by houses and the Charlton Athletic Football Club Stadium.

References

- Allen, A. A., 1978. *Thymelicus lineola* Ochs., *Nemophora fasciella* F., etc., at Blackheath, 1977. *Ent. Rec.*, **90**: 220-221.
 Burton, J. F., 1955. The Butterflies of the North-West Kent Marshes with special reference to the 1953 Floods., *Lond. Nat.*, **34**: 54-60.
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 Owen, D. F., and Owen, J. E., 1950. The Butterflies of Greenwich Park. *Ent. Rec.*, **62**: 15-16.

CORRECTION. — *Tyria jacobaeae* L. ab. *pallidula* Watson. On p. 153, line 5 down of this Note, for "pallens" read pallida.
 — EDITOR.